

Abelson Taylor

Chicago shop keeps building on a legacy of success and stellar work



"Nobody talks about web sites, but that's where the revenue is. People use them"

—Dale Taylor

AbelsonTaylor's 2011 and 2012 are looking a lot like 2010, and this is a very, very good thing. The independent company, with 484 employees as of May 31, has continued on its path of explosive growth, seeing its headcount rise by 4.8% this year and by 14.6% in 2011. All that expansion needs someplace to go, and that means outwards. Last year, the agency took on 7,200 square feet of space, but even tacking on an amount of square footage that is equal to about 21 New York studio apartments has not been enough.

"One of our biggest issues right now is space in our building. We have over three floors in this building and we're going to need to take on more," President and CEO Dale Taylor said.

The growth is a combination of increasing its IT and adding creative muscle, with a greater emphasis on backend hires this year than last year, due to increasing digital business. Powering the rising headcount is a workload that had the health business clocking in at 10% more than the year before. Last year's total: 12

new accounts, seven without a pitch. This year's pace is equally brisk—AT has chalked up seven wins this year. Six of these recent wins also rolled in without a pitch.

SVP Jay Carter said although it may be an industry trend to get business based on past work, for AT it's pretty much become the norm. His explanation was a riff on the oft-quoted "you never get fired for hiring IBM." The IBM-like halo has also expanded the type of work the agency does, and AT has taken on more broadcast work, in addition to expanding its digital reach.

But AT has been determined since the beginning that growth has to be measured. "Dale told me in complete seriousness right around 1997, 'I'd be perfectly happy if we stop at 100 [employees],'" Carter said.

This means the agency has not been shy about turning away business. Taylor said simply scooping up work because it's there for the taking would violate two company goals: First, Carter and Taylor said it would tip the employee work-life balance in an unfavorable direction. Second, Taylor said that keeping up with a breakneck pace would dilute the quality of the agency's work, because it would mean "hiring every warm body you could find." This, Taylor said, would not fly.

Refusing business could be considered risky, but Taylor said the agency turns down work without fear. "I think when we say no to more business, we sort of put our money where our mouth is in terms of telling our staff and our clients that we want to do the best work."

"The reason that we always give is that we just don't have the capacity to take on a pitch right now and still serve the needs of our clients," he explained.

As for fallout: Taylor said spurned clients have been known to come back to see if AT had any free bandwidth. One even told Taylor, "I don't think I've ever called an agency and had them say no because they're too busy before... I like the fact that you said you were too busy to pitch."

In fact, Taylor and Carter said they continue to grow because they want to give their employees the chance to really explore their careers. Although the agency's career track is not quite the mailroom-to-boardroom scenario, it comes close: Copywriters start as fact checkers/clinical researchers, designers begin in art production, and account managers usually get their start in traffic. And employees tend to stick around. Carter said grad school is usually the main reason employees leave. It doesn't mean promotions don't happen—123 AT-ers were promoted last year—but it does mean dramatic leadership changes don't happen very often. The agency made a creative director a VP earlier this year, but the last major shift was in 2010 when Carter split his job into two and Nancy Drescher became VP, director of client services. "Nancy just flat out does a better job at it," Carter said.

The ground-up training is part of an overall ethic that Carter said continues to attract clients. Carter said it's also why clients have pulled some agency work and given it to AT, because AT knows how to navigate

